Out of Mystic:

Photographs and Poems from the 38th Voyage of the Charles W. Morgan

Daniel G. Payne
Loomings  
(Chapter 1)

_I always go to sea as a sailor because of the wholesome exercise and pure air of the forecastle deck._

Even the saltiest, most sun-dried whaler once looked at his first ship—wild anticipation mingled with a maelstrom of dread; oily dreams disturbed by nightmares of a watery abyss. Chief concerns of the 38th voyage: How will the ship handle? Will we sight whales? If so, are they forgiving?
In looking at things spiritual, we are too much like oysters observing the sun through the water, and thinking that thick water the thinnest of air.

Father Mapple was only one of a legion of nautical chaplains, breathing damnation and salvation with the same breath. With mortality omnipresent, sailors slurped down a viscous chowder of Christian dogma and pagan superstition, then peered at ocean and sky like pagan priests studying runes, entrails and bones, looking for omens ill or fair.
She was a ship of the old school... Her ancient decks were worn and wrinkled.

Despite a potbellied hold built for carrying capacity, and a layover of over 150 years, when the tugboat lines were slipped and sails set to the wind, a dray horse became a thoroughbred.
Soon the crew came on board in twos and threes; the riggers bestirred themselves; the mates were actively engaged.

Provincetown’s evening rain tapers off to a mist as the 38th voyagers gather on the dock—introductions, projects, stories exchanged, with the Morgan rocking gently in the harbor. A familiar sight for visitors to Mystic Seaport and the ship’s longtime moorings on the river, but a glorious anachronism back on salt water.
All deep earnest thinking is but
the intrepid effort of the soul to keep
the open independence of her sea.

Anchored in Provincetown’s tranquil harbor, the head light seems only
a superfluity— but just over the dunes on the Atlantic shore, for hundreds of years treacherous shoals and shallows claimed unwary sailing ships, their bleached bones still unexpectedly exhumed at times by the irreverent sea.
In most American whalemens the mast-heads are manned almost simultaneously with the vessel’s leaving her port.

“Let me make a clean breast of it here,” Ishmael confesses, “and admit that I kept but sorry guard.” Like Ishmael or Childe Harold, the philosophical Melville must have kept a distracted watch during his years at sea, when just a few hours on the Morgan brings Platonic reveries forth like unbidden visitants from a distant galaxy.
Dusk
(Chapter 38)

With the soft feeling of the human in me, yet will I try to fight ye, ye grim phantom futures!

In the half-light between day and night, sky and sea reveal themselves in harmonious unity. Memories are created by this twilight, made tangible once more by the senses—fragrance of salt air, the feel of oaken planks, the rhythmic slap of living waters on wood and stone.
Crack, crack, old ship!
So long as thou crackest,
Thou holdest! Well done!

Twenty or more sailors crammed into the steamy forecastle, no bigger than a dormitory room—bunk beds sized like coffins. Water slaps on wood inches from your face as you breathe warm, moist air stale and redolent with the sounds and smells of restless sleep.
The Line
(Chapter 60)

All men live enveloped with whales lines; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the subtile, ever present perils of life.

For whalers the line was an inchoate reminder of mortality, a mundane instrument with the power to part the opaque curtain between life & death. Only those inured to the constant presence of doom could pull an oar with a halter round their necks with not one whit more of terror than though seated before their domestic hearth with a poker, and not a harpoon, by his side.
It needs a strong, nervous arm to strike the first iron into the fish; for often...the heavy instrument has to be thrown twenty or thirty feet.

The Morgan’s harpoons and lances, now touched with rust, still retain the formidable appearance of their bloody past—the oxidized iron of the shaft gives them a rough texture, the old wooden handles are reminiscent of weathered garden tools; the rakes and mattocks of harpooneers hunting a warm-blooded harvest.
My own individuality was now merged... another’s mistake or misfortune might plunge me into unmerited disaster.

In an era when self-reliance and the myth of rugged independence held sway over the national culture, what better corrective than a whale ship? Each sailor was a bit of twine forming the lines and rigging; a thread in the canvas; a plank in the barrier between ship and sea.
Like a plethoric burning martyr, or a self-consuming misanthrope, once ignited, the whale burns by his own body.

Billows of black smoke roiling up heavy and dark from marked a whale ship. A “blubber boiler” at work reeked “like the left wing of the day of judgment,” but inured to the choking fumes, the whalers dropped fresh strips of blubber into the boiling cauldrons, as the whale’s crisp remains became its own funeral pyre.
The whaleman, as he
Seeks the food of light,
so he lives in light.

There is such a surfeit of light in
the 21st century that we must go to the
sea and other wild places to see the
night sky of our ancestors. “Are
modern folk, perhaps, afraid of
night?” asked Henry Beston, “Do they
fear that vast serenity, the mystery of
infinite space, the austerity of stars?”
No longer will I guide my earthly way by thee; for me, the level ship’s compass, and the level dead-reckoning by log and line.

The art and science of celestial navigation, the practiced eye of a navigator probing the secrets of sun and stars, were made manifest on the mariner’s maps and charts. Quadrants and Bowditch’s Navigator have yielded to GPS and digital technology but the old technology still draws voyagers like filings to a magnet.
Epilogue

Round and round, then, and ever contracting towards the button-like black bubble at the axis of that slowly wheeling circle, like another Ixion I did revolve.

When the Morgan returned to New Bedford from its maiden voyage on January 1, 1845, few were there to witness its return, a stark contrast to Boston Harbor 170 years later, where crowds ignored the mundane miracles taking off from the nearby airport to welcome another miracle, Mystic Seaport’s vision made manifest.